A South Seas Children's Paradise

By JAMES NORMAN HALL,
Author of "Kitchener's Mob," High Adventure," &c.

SOMEWHERE in the Caledonian wilds of Boston are two boys, 7 and 9, to whom I should like to offer thanks for a very happy suggestion. But since I do not know their names and saw very little of their faces, it is not likely that I shall ever meet them again or know them if I do. Meanwhile I remain their debtor, and the reason for this requires a word of explanation.

I was about to set out on a journey to the islands of the South Pacific, and never having been nearer the tropics than St. Louis, Mo., I had no idea what I should take in the way of equipment.

One day shortly before I was to sail I was thinking this matter over while walking down Washington street in Boston. It was midafternoon and the street was thronged with shoppers. I was making my way slowly along, when the crowd thickened, if that were possible, at the corner of a street while a stream of cross traffic flowed by. In the crush I was pushed against the window of a five and ten cent store, and it was there I saw the two boys, with their noses pressed flatly against the glass while they discussed the contents of the window. One of them was explaining that the law about pocket knives is that the big blade must be no longer than the width of your hand, and the other said: "Aw! I becha I could carry a longer one if I wanted to."

Then followed speculation as to what a policeman would do if he saw you with a knife whose big blade was an inch longer than the width of your hand—two inches, three inches; and from this their conversation turned to the merits of some tops and whistles in the window.

Boys Give Him Bright Idea.

Listening to their conversation it suddenly occurred to me that whatever else I might find among the islands of the South Seas, certainly there would be no five and ten cent stores. Why not lay in a lot of odds and ends of things for the native children? The idea seemed a good one and I acted upon it at once.

I couldn't have come to a better place for that sort of equipment. During the rest of the afternoon until closing time I fully occupied the services of one salesgirl, and when my purchases were completed I found that I had 148 articles: Tops, pocket knives, jumpingjacks, some mechanical toys, animals made of celluloid which would float in water, whistles, horns, jigsaw puzzles, necklaces of beads, beads of assorted colors in glass bottles, of which necklaces could be made; dolls, doll carriages, bedroom and kitchen sets for dolls, picture books, kites, jewelry of all sorts, fifteen pounds of chocolates and ten of peanut candy—the entire outfit costing but $34.80. All of these things the salesgirl packed neatly in a large wooden box, and I left the store with it under my arm, or rather on my shoulder, feeling a little ashamed of my sudden enthusiasm for shopping.

Two months later, almost to a day, I was more than 5,000 miles from Washington street, Boston, and taking passage on a three masted trading schooner to go still further away. The captain of this vessel was an American, an "old timer" in the islands, who had been trading among them since 1880.

"What you got in that box?" he asked, when my luggage was being brought on board.

"Oh, nothing much," I said, for I was reluctant to tell him what an unscientific lot of gear I had chosen for my Polynesian wanderings. I had to display it, however, in order that custom authorities might be satisfied that I carried no contraband. The captain looked it over in silence and then he said: "Well, you're the most sensibly equipped traveler for these parts I've met in forty years. How in the world did you happen to think of bringing this sort of an outfit?"

I told him of the two boys I had met outside the five-and-ten-cent store in Boston. "Good for them!" he said. "They gave you a mighty fine suggestion. Now I'll tell you what we'll do. There is an island which the natives call Hetia where I put in sometimes. I hadn't expected to make it this voyage. It will be about one hundred miles off my course, but no matter. Time doesn't count for much in this part of the world. We'll go to Hetia anyway, for there are more children on that island than wild goats, and if we're to play Santa Claus we couldn't strike a better place no matter how far we traveled. Just wait! If we don't have some fun there I'll miss my guess."

On an Island of Boys' Dreams.

We sighted Hetia about 8 o'clock one September morning and by midday had it in full view. I have never seen a wilder, more lonely looking place. From the west it seemed no more than a partly submerged range of mountains, the walls falling sheer, in many places, from a height of one to two thousand feet. Through my glasses I could see scores of wild goats browsing on steep slopes and narrow ledges. Higher up were strips of tableland covered with grass and fern. The mountains were green to the summits and, seen in the bright sunshine, gave an impression of savage beauty not to be described in words. There was not a sign anywhere of a habitation and I said to the skipper: "Where's the settlement? Where are all those children you were telling me about?"

"You'll see plenty of 'em in about an hour's time," he said. "All the low land is on the eastern side. There is a fine little harbor there too, where the schooner can lie snug and safe. I'll be able to go ashore with you and enjoy myself."

The moment we hove into sight in the boat passage here they came; children of all ages and descriptions except as to color, which was uniformly brown; some with clothes on, some without, some swimming out, some paddling small canoes or sailing larger ones.

"What did I tell you?" said the captain. "You know, I believe this is the place the Pied Piper brought all the kids when their parents refused to pay him for getting rid of the rats. What was the name of that town they came from—Hamlin? Well, he couldn't have brought 'em to a better place. Hetia is a children's paradise."

There was no doubt of that in my mind. It was just the sort of place boys at home dream of and long for. Looking at it from the schooner, which came to anchor about two hundred yards from the beach, I remembered my own boyish dreams of the perfect island. There were to be streams of cool water running down from the mountains of the interior, with groves of orange trees and bananas growing along the banks. There was to be a lagoon so clear that you could see the fish swimming about in the depths; mountains to climb, and high up on them broad, green meadows made for kite flying. And, most important of all, there wasn't to be a school or a school teacher on the entire island.

Hetia was the realization in every detail of this dream, and I regretted that I had discovered it a little late to be able to appreciate the no school feature of it as I would have some years earlier.

The chief of the settlement was a great friend of the captain, and sent word out by one of his boys that he wanted us to spend the night at his house. It was about 4 in the afternoon when he went ashore, but as meals come at any hour in the islands we were not surprised to find supper all ready for us. A table had been laid out of doors back of the chief's house. Seven of us sat down to the meal, the chief, his brother, his three eldest sons, the captain and myself. The chief's wife and daughters waited on us, according to island custom.

It was a typical Polynesian banquet, with raw fish to begin with. These are really delicious when dipped in a sauce of cocoanut milk flavored with lime juice. Then came fish, freshly caught, baked and broiled, with lobsters, and fresh water shrimps, roasted breadfruit, mangoes, bananas and other fruit and cocoanut water of the green nuts to drink. When we had finished we took our chairs out in front of the house, where there was a very pretty lawn cut short and even by those natural lawn mowers, goats, of which the island had a plentiful supply, both wild and domesticated. But the children, as the captain had said, were even more plentiful. They were playing about everywhere, in the trees, on the beach, in and under the water.

Children Spread News.

"Now," said the captain, "just to give you an idea how quickly news spreads in the islands, I'll tell one of these youngsters to pass the word around about our party."

He did, and within five minutes the whole gang had assembled, seventy-three of them, as we found later by actual count, and this included only those from about 14 years down. They had not waited to dress up, and their mothers came running after them with bits of clothing of all sorts.

One little chap of about 4 years, his mother lassoed with an old sleeveless undershirt of his father, and he came streaking on to the rendezvous, with the tail of it dragging out behind him like a train. Another, who had no clothes perhaps, was clad extempore in two hibiscus leaves strung on a piece of bark tied around his waist, one before and one behind. These formalities having been arranged, we lined them up in two files, beginning with the little ones, the boys in one and the girls in the other. Then we began the distribution of presents at the first Christmas party, which, in the captain's opinion, had been held on the island since the dawn of creation. At any rate it was the first one which had been held in September.

The children were surprisingly well behaved. I have seen less orderly children's parties in more civilized places. There was no crowding, no grabbing and, most astonishing of all, every one seemed delighted with what he or she received. It was interesting to watch their faces when the gifts were passed out. They were not long in discovering the use of horns and whistles, but they had no more idea than their parents what some of the things were for.

We had to demonstrate the mechanical toys, jumping jacks and the monkeys which climbed a string. These made a wonderful hit, and the elders crowded around as eagerly as the children to watch the performances. But the most appropriate gifts of all, it seemed to me, were the bathroom toys, the celluloid animals. There was only one bathtub on the island, and that was the lagoon which surrounded it, and as soon as the children learned that the animals were aquatic like themselves they had them in their native element. The beach shelved off steeply into deep water, and it was as pretty a sight as I have seen in many a day to watch those children diving far down with their alligators and elephants and ducks and giraffes, then letting them go and watching them rise to the surface. Some of the little girls who had received dolls were disappointed at first because they wouldn't float; but as they would sink they removed the clothing from their newly acquired babies, tossed them into deep water and then dove after them.

A Concert of Gratitude.

Five and ten cent stores are not accustomed to packing confections for tropical export, so the chocolate and peanut candy was in something of a mess, but, judging by what happened, it was still thoroughly eatable.

The tumult and the shouting ceased at last, and the horn and whistle blowing as well. The crowd dispersed and the captain and I prepared to retire to our mats on the chief's veranda. He was chuckling over some of the events of the evening. We had spent nearly an hour over one of our demonstrations, a jigsaw puzzle, which represented when put together the picture of Washington crossing the Delaware. We had to explain who Washington was, where he was going and why; and an old man who was looking on said, "Eaha tera mau mea?"—What are those things?—pointing to the lumps of ice which the soldiers were pushing away from the boats. This wasn't so easy to explain, for the islanders have no more conception of ice than the Esquimaux have of a land of perpetual summer.

"Well," said the captain, "it was a fine party. I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much. As for these kids—if you come back here twenty-five years from now you will find plenty of 'em who will still remember this day."

Suddenly he raised himself on one elbow. "Hello! It isn't over yet! What's up now I wonder?"

The children were coming back in groups of four or five. They sat down on the lawn about twenty yards from the veranda, no one making a sound. We didn't stir, pretending that we were asleep. When they had all assembled they began to sing, in full chorus, and for the next hour they gave us a concert which was worth going twice five thousand miles to hear.

Eating a Christmas dinner in the South Seas.

A Practical Dictionary Needed

LIKE many books called classics which we speak of reverently and never look at, the dictionary of our language seems to be falling into disuse; we seldom consult it. If a strange word "swims into our ken" we regard it as an impertinence or we use it as a kind of game; we argue about it, discuss it, guess, bet, and perhaps write to the newspapers for a definition, but we don't consult the dictionary.

Perhaps the reason for our neglect is that the unabridged dictionary is too cumbersome and it gives too many meanings, though thin papers cut the ordinary bulk. Simple words therein are found to be both noun and verb (spelled alike), and sometimes they have more than a dozen distinct meanings. This is disconcerting. There may be room for a dictionary with the obsolete and archaic words left out, a true twentieth century dictionary that shall be fool proof.